Published in

Consumption, Markets & Culture (April 2016)

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10253866.2016.1155827#abstract

Book Review

Data, Now Bigger and Better!
TOM BOELLSTORFF AND BILL MAURER (EDS)
Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015 108 pp,
ISBN: 9780984201068, (paper)

In 2008, Chris Anderson published the article "The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete" in Wired Magazine. The article embellishes the opportunities offered by "big data" and heightens them to a superpower that will resolve all the world's problems from rescuing humanity from epidemics to reducing the pressure on the infrastructure. The belief in the power of "data" is not new. As the contributors to "Data, Now Bigger and Better!" point out empiricism and mathematical formalism had become fashionable in anthropology a century ago before sustained social-scientific critique exposed their limitations and curtailed their impact on the discipline. In a similar way, currently "big data" are hyped up and seen as a means to fully understand the social world, including markets and consumers.

The contributors to this book relate contemporary discussions of "big data" to the history of anthropology by referring to anthropological concepts and to the writings of Geertz, Levi-Strauss, Malinowski, Mauss, Rivers and others. This orientation to anthropology not only challenges the argument that we are facing a "big data revolution" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Thomas & McSharry, 2015) but also provides a way to examine the "big data" phenomenon in a novel way, as Genevieve Bell suggests in her chapter "The Secret Life of Big Data".

What has brought the contributors to this fascinating, slim volume together is the anthropological lens to analyse the "big data" phenomenon. The authors criticize that large parts of the debate about "big data" often focus on technical aspects and exaggerate the opportunities that "big data" open up for society and the economy. This critique is directed, first, at the naïve empiricism instantiated in articles like Chris Anderson's widely referred to 'data deluge' piece in Wired. Those promoting the opportunities of "big data" ignore that data, however big, thick or long they are, represent reality, but they are not the same as reality (Bell, Boellstorff, Seaver). Hence, whoever makes decisions about the collection of data, i.e. those who code algorithms

that organise data gathering, influences how users perceive reality. In recent years, this critique of big data has been popularised by Eli Pariser's (2011) book "The Filter Bubble" and his accompanying TED talk. It is not only that users do only see a segment of reality but also that it is not transparent which parts of reality are excluded from their view and why (Bell). In his chapter "Bastard Algebra" Nick Seaver elegantly brings Bronislaw Malinowski's critique of the formalization of anthropology in the early 20th century into play. Malinowski famously criticised the attempts to formalize kinship for missing the details of daily life, the flesh and blood of relationships (Seaver, p.33). Seaver's reference to Malinowski as well as Bell's brief discussion of ancient uses of data from William the Conqueror to the Chinese bureaucracy suggest that "big data" is not a new phenomenon (Bell, p.10-11). In fact, the belief in the opportunities offered by big data is remindful of 19th century empiricism that seemed to have been discarded by a century of social scientific critique and replaced by more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to study the social world (Bell, pp.24-26). Bell, for example, critiques recurring arguments that conceive data as clear, unambiguous and complete representations of (social) reality when in fact there is considerable variation in the access to and the gathering and analysis of data (Bell, p. 20; Seavers, p. 41). In her view, the growing debate about big data calls for anthropological studies that engage with programmers of big data gathering and analysis tools. The engagement with coding processes may also require anthropologists to learn to code (Bell, p.43).

Seaver's chapter is followed by Melissa Gregg's "The Gift is not Given" that also expands on Bell's argument that data are not to be equated with fact but they are always subject to interpretation. Whilst the Latin origin of the word "data" refers to an object that is "given", as Gregg explains, her analysis of the "big data" phenomenon reveals that, first, no gift comes for free – cf. Marcel Mauss discussion of "The Gift" – but, second, "big data has resembled a gift for tech companies seeking to reinvent themselves from the triumphant years of desktop computing" (Gregg, p.65). Gregg's analysis of the "big data" phenomenon comes with a warning, also for those in industry - she herself works for Intel Labs - because the creation of large databases entails responsibilities of use, transaction and dependence. These points of warning dovetail with the arguments made by Bell and Seaver in earlier chapters who like Gregg call for caution when discussing the opportunities that "big data" offer to business and society. "Big data" like earlier technological developments come with unintended consequences for people and corporations (Bell, pp. 18-19).

Bill Maurer's chapter "Principles of Descent and Alliance for Big Data" picks up the points of critique of big data raised in Bell's, Seaver's and Gregg's contributions. He uses his critique of the technology pioneer Jaron Lanier's (2011, 2013) recent publications as a starting point to rethink the relationship between people and corporations. Lanier is concerned about the surreptitious data gathering of data by companies. He considers the business practices involved in the data gathering and analysis as dehumanizing and proposes that nano-payments to remunerate people for the data they give to corporations can re-humanize relationships. In his view, such payments would require corporations like Google to make transparent what people buy into when they use their services. Maurer criticizes that Lanier's proposal implies to turn existing relationships between people and corporations into commercial relationships that entail the application of an object-logic to information when talking about property (p.76-77). Being an anthropologist Maurer then suggests to use the concept of "kinship" to examine the relationship between people and corporations. The kinship concept allows him to ask questions like "Are we making children with Mother or Father Google?" or "Are we the siblings of the datas [sic], and who is jockeying for rank with whom?". By confronting the "big data" phenomenon with such questions Maurer encourages readers to reflect on their own relationship with corporations and more widely to rethink the impact data gathering practices may have for the structure of social relationships.

The book ends with Tom Boellstorff's chapter "Making Big Data, In Theory" in which the author provides further arguments for the wider implications of big data for society's structure. Referring to the Snowden affair Boellstorff suggests that "big data" reconfigures power relationships because those who are in control of the data and their interpretation are in charge of defining people's reality. The processes of giving away data to corporations therefore can be likened to the "'confessional' discourse" (Boellstorff, p. 102) that Foucault has referred to in his books on sexuality. Social media and networking sites "incite" people to publically talk and disclose themselves, thus making themselves vulnerable in the sense of Goffman's (1963) discussion of "stigma". Boellstorff, however, arrives at maybe surprising conclusions when he suggests that resistance to big data should not mean the withdrawal from being counted but rather to ensure that everybody is counted (Boellstorff, p. 104), an argument that may need further explication considering discussions elsewhere currently rethink privacy and develop arguments for obfuscation (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015; Hartzog & Selinger, 2015). Moreover, whilst Chris Anderson in the above mentioned Wired

article suggested that theory could be replaced by data, Boellstorff (p.107-108) argues that there is a need "for theories that make claims about patterns and dynamics beyond the case study and the individual field site". Big data, he says do not exist in isolation (cf. Bell above) but they are part of and shape social reality.

"Data, Now Bigger and Better!" makes important contributions to current debates about "big data". It provides a refreshing new perspective on the phenomenon by invoking anthropological theories that invite readers to critically reflect on the public debate that highlights either utopian or dystopian consequences for society. The contributors to this small but powerful volume show how theory is anything but obsolete. This book makes me hopeful that we can look forward to forthcoming empirical research projects that will focus on the practical production and organization of the big-data-reality.

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